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Article (Published Version)

Decolonizing Critical Theory?

Epistemological Justice, Progress, Reparations

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ABSTRACT Theorists working within the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory have not been immune to calls to "decolonize" that have been circulating in and beyond the academic world. This article asks what it means to seek to decolonize a tradition of thought that has never explicitly acknowledged colonial histories. What is needed, instead, this article suggests, is consideration of the very implications of the "colonial modern"—that is, an acknowledgement of the colonial constitution of modernity—for Frankfurt School critical theory's idea of historical progress. The issue is more extensive than simply acknowledging the substantive neglect of colonialism within the tradition; rather, this article suggests that its categories of critique and their associated normative claims are also necessarily implicated by this neglect and require transformation. Acknowledgment of colonial histories requires material reparations for the substantive inequalities bequeathed as legacies of the past, but these reparations also require a transformation of understandings and a recognition of "epistemological justice."

KEYWORDS postcolonialism, colonial histories, epistemology, reparations, modernity

Introduction

Recent years have seen calls to "decolonize" disciplines and institutions circulate around much of the world. These calls have often been taken up as provocations by colleagues interested in interrogating the Eurocentered understandings at the heart of much academic knowledge. In the field of critical theory, Amy Allen's *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* is exemplary in this regard. It seeks both to demonstrate Frankfurt School critical theory's reliance on Eurocentric understandings and to decolonize critical theory "by rethinking its strategy for grounding normativity."[1] In this article, I consider Allen's broader argument and ask what it would mean to decolonize a tradition of thought—Frankfurt School critical theory—that has never explicitly acknowledged colonialism or colonial histories. As such, I suggest that the question of

DOI 10.1215/26410478-8855227

decolonizing Frankfurt School critical theory would be, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's terms, a catachresis—that is, the "application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote,"[2] "a metaphor that spills over its boundaries."[3] Spivak suggests that such "spillage" can be productive. In this case, it produces a shift of focus within critical theory. However, in doing so, it reveals that Frankfurt School critical theory has not previously engaged substantively with the histories of colonialism and enslavement. An effort to decolonize Frankfurt School critical theory, therefore, necessarily must question the histories that it mobilizes in support of its normative claims and, thereby, question those claims.

Critical theory, in its broadest sense, includes a variety of traditions of critique from diverse geographical locations. In this article, I will be drawing on critical arguments from the traditions of postcolonialism and decoloniality. These I will apply to the form of critical theory specific to the Frankfurt School. In particular, I will be concerned with its Hegelian conception of history as the development of freedom and recognition. "Modernity" is both defined within this tradition as the realization of freedom and presented as "an unfinished project."[4] The "unfinished" nature of modernity within the Frankfurt School tradition is classically considered in Marxian terms—in terms of the development of class relations as an internal contradiction of capitalism, where capitalist modernity has to overcome external constraints in order to incorporate premodern formations into its internal dialectic before emancipation can be realized. In this context, the colonial constitution of modernity is displaced from consideration, and those who were dispossessed and made subordinate in the processes that established what is understood as "European modernity" have no place from which to participate in the development of freedom in their own right. This is what I will set out as forming an "epistemological injustice" intrinsic to Frankfurt School critical theory. The issue is more extensive than simply the substantive neglect of colonialism within the tradition; rather, I suggest that its categories of critique and their associated normative claims are also necessarily implicated by this neglect and need to be addressed.

1.

Frankfurt School theorists, as Bruce Baum argues, were not as silent as some have suggested on issues of colonialism and racism.[5] Specifically, they did address anti-Semitism and regarded it as an extreme form of racism. However, they did not directly connect racism and the social structures of colonialism globally.[6] Racism was primarily understood as a cultural phenomenon with a contingent relation to the primary, class-based social structures of modernity from which colonial forms of labor and dispossession were rendered marginal. As such, Baum, along with James Ingram, primarily sees the resources of postcolonial theory, broadly understood, as pertaining to issues of representation, particularity, and racialized iden-

tities.[7] Essentially, this is to understand postcolonialism through its expression within disciplines in the humanities, rather than to develop a specifically sociological or social scientific account of its significance in relation to the theory of society that is the adjunct of Frankfurt School critical theory.[8] The issues of colonialism, I suggest, go beyond the hierarchies of identity and representation, however important these hierarchies may be, to entail social structures which are not simply historical but continue into the present and underlie identities. The disjuncture I am drawing attention to here is between the humanities' focus on postcolonial identities within the modern world and a postcolonial sociology that draws attention to the elision of the colonial constitution of that world and the specific social structures through which it operates.[9]

In this context, Allen does ask the necessary questions about Frankfurt School critical theory's complicity with "imperialist metanarratives" and engage with postcolonial and decolonial arguments from the social sciences in her discussion.[10] However, the solution to the problems raised, for her, seems to be primarily to transform—that is, to decolonize—critical theory's approach to grounding normativity and not to address its framing of modernity. As such, the issue for Allen is not straightforwardly to call into question the inheritance of modernity or, relatedly, the idea that modernity does, indeed, represent historical progress. Rather, she argues, drawing on the work of Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault, that we need to problematize our own point of view in order to more fully realize modernity's central value, namely freedom. The issue, however, is the extent to which normative foundations can be decolonized without addressing the explanatory claims about modern society that are integral to those foundations. Further, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang forcefully remind us, decolonization is not a metaphor.[11] The easy adoption of the language of decolonization within our disciplines and institutions is no substitute for doing the work needed to effect both material and epistemological change.

As Max Horkheimer initially set out, critical theory "never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery."[12] Slavery, in this context, is used as a metaphor to describe social life in conformity with authority, that is, heteronomy. It does not refer to the actually existing practice of chattel slavery that was being instituted in the "New World" concomitant with the emergence of "emancipation" as a key theme within Enlightenment thought. One question that is immediately raised, then, is how a theory of emancipation—and especially one that seeks to realize the practical aim of emancipating humanity from a slavery understood as a metaphor for heteronomy—can fail to take into consideration the implications of the distinctly modern form of slavery with which the Enlightenment and Enlightenment thought is directly associated.

Failing to address this contradiction means that Frankfurt School critical theory cannot adequately account for how modernity, apparently, creates the condi-

tions for freedom to be realized at the same time as it institutes the systematic enslavement and colonization of populations. The issue is not simply one of contemporaneity, but, more significantly, of mutual constitution. The modern (European) subject, defined in terms of self-ownership, comes into being in the context of wider discourses of emancipation and is constituted through the practice of taking others *into* ownership and appropriating their means of subsistence and reproduction. It is the failure to address the significance of this appropriation for the emergence of the modern (subject) and its related discourses of freedom that I am calling attention to here.

What is needed, then, is consideration of the implications of the "colonial modern"—that is, an acknowledgement of the colonial constitution of modernity—for critical theory's idea of historical progress. The very idea of progress seeks to ensure a necessary forward movement toward freedom, but this movement is based on the self-conscious denial of freedom to others by the very subjects claiming progress. Frankfurt School critical theory lays claim to dialogue based on "good faith" but gives no space to those others who understand their histories as histories of oppression by "modern subjects" (those formed in the process of the European subject becoming modern, that is, free). Dialogue can only be entered on the terms established by such "modern subjects."

This, I argue, is an issue of *epistemological* justice. This is a concept that I distinguish from Miranda Fricker's understanding of "*epistemic* justice" (although there are, of course, continuities between these ideas).[13] Fricker argues that the generic understanding of epistemic injustice can be characterized by the idea of being wronged in one's capacity as a knower, as a producer of knowledge. This occurs as a consequence of one's being deemed lacking in credibility by the listener, either as an individual or as a consequence of being a member of a marginalized social group. This "wrong," for Fricker, is located in the interactions between people and refers primarily to issues related to the misunderstanding of social experience by others and even by oneself as a consequence of prior denials of the validity of lived experiences. In contrast, I argue that "epistemological justice" should be understood in terms of the adequacy of the "grand narratives" that structure the contexts within which we come to understand ourselves and others. It is this which shapes who has the power (and why) to assert their knowledge against the indications of its problematic status deriving from the different knowledge claims of others.

As such, epistemological justice would mean addressing the ways in which colonization and slavery were integral to the Enlightenment project of modernity—structuring its knowledge claims as well as its institutions—but rendered invisible to it. It is this legacy, inherited uncritically by Frankfurt School critical theory, that requires fundamental reconsideration and transformation. One of the distinctive characteristics of Frankfurt School critical theory is that it makes "the social"

central to understandings of the political, the cultural, and the individual. This is also, however, what keeps it located within standard historical interpretations, as I shall come to argue. For the social under consideration is straightforwardly seen as the "modern social," where modernity is presented as the outcome of endogenous processes of European history. There is no consideration of Europe's colonial entanglements or practices of enslavement. My concern with "epistemological justice"—recognition of the knowledge claims of others in terms both of respect and (re)constructive response—is not unconnected to concerns with justice in the world. It is precisely because I am interested in the latter that I wish to consider the ways in which the very forms of knowledge and knowledge production contribute, or do not contribute, to this endeavor.

2.

The organization of Frankfurt School critical theory between and across the disciplines of philosophy and sociology points to the two particular aims that define its project. The first is normative and concerned with the nature of an immanent project of reason. The second is substantive, associating that project and its conditions of possibility with a theory of society and social development. Frankfurt School critical theory presents itself, for the most part, as inheriting the Enlightenment project in philosophy and moving beyond it by locating its historical and sociological conditions. If we see Enlightenment philosophy as coalescing around liberal ideas of subjectivity—the private individual, sovereign and self-determined—then the philosophical tradition of critical theory is represented by critical engagements with this idea. In particular, it seeks to restore a *social* self-understanding of the individualized subject and points to the importance of recognizing its formation in relations of interdependence. This reorientation is located in the work of Kant and Hegel, with the tradition of critical theory particularly drawn to Hegel. This orientation tends to be filtered through a Marxian theory of society, which is used to critique Hegel's unconscious and, for critical theorists, alienated endorsement of bourgeois social structures. When that Marxian theory of society is given up, as it is by later theorists within the tradition from Habermas onwards, however, then critical theory finds itself moved back to Hegel and Kant to debate the modern inheritors of the classic liberal tradition such as John Rawls. Of course, that then produces a possibility of revision to the revision—the return to Marx in the work of Rahel Jaeggi, for example.[14] My point, however, is that this movement circulates around specific figures of European Enlightenment and its critique and does not venture outside that frame.

In relation to its engagement with the sociological tradition—the Frankfurt School's "theory of society"—there is a similar trajectory to that described above. At the outset, the Frankfurt School was closely associated with a Marxist theory of

society and a belief in the necessity of radical socioeconomic change. This set its critical theory apart from sociology in that, in critical theory's terms, sociology was seen to be based on "traditional" rather than "critical" thought.[15] This was a consequence of sociology's presumed acceptance of bourgeois social structures and its orientation to reform (rather than revolution). Across the generations, however—from Horkheimer to Habermas to Honneth—Marxism's role is diminished, with Weber replacing Marx as a key figure for understanding modern society. As John Holmwood argues, Habermas is pivotal in this shifting trajectory, with his reconstruction of Marx rendering his criticism similar to that of Talcott Parsons, albeit unselfconsciously.[16] Honneth, for his part, goes on—in *Freedom's Right*—to endorse Parsons' synthesis of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim in his theory of modern society.[17] This, Honneth suggests, can provide the template for a sociological theory of modernity that can operate as the complement to critical theory's normative project. With this, the Frankfurt School could be argued to have come around to a position of confirming the very bourgeois social structures it had previously criticized, albeit allowing that others can assert the need for a return to Marx, without addressing the explanatory problems that led some to find an alternative in Weber and Parsons. The possibility that those explanatory problems are associated with a common neglect of colonialism in sociological theories of modernity is not addressed.

I have set out this trajectory—from a critical orientation to modern society to its confirmation—briefly and starkly; of course, not all Frankfurt School theorists make this shift, but these are the parameters of what is debated. The key issue is to point to the way in which Marxism provided the initial jolt for the Frankfurt School to go beyond Kant and Hegel and to address material issues associated with the development of capitalism.[18] The theory of society initially adopted by critical theorists was essentially a Marxist variant, which, as I have written elsewhere, shares some of the other characteristics of mainstream social theory.[19] While a dialectics of class is made central to understandings of society within such a theoretical framework, Marxism itself effaces colonial relations, or at least makes them subordinate to and ultimately transformed by the class relations of capitalism. While the Frankfurt School tradition has come to regard that particular dialectic of class relations as an implausible account of modern society, this has not been accompanied by a consideration of the issues of coloniality that were missing, or displaced, in its earlier versions. These theories have merely replaced it with a more "complex" sociological account equally silent on colonialism.

Postcolonial and decolonial theories can provide a further jolt to shift the trajectory, away from its current confirmation of modernity and modern social structures, to address more thoroughly the colonial inheritance from which it issues. This is not to suggest a return to Marx, but rather that we should look beyond

Marxism to what the Western tradition of social thought, in all its variants, has neglected. Specifically, we should look to the relations of colonialism, dispossession, appropriation, enslavement, and extraction that form a secondary part of its accounts of modern society. For example, they are assigned to "primitive accumulation" where the formation of formally free labor—the commodification of labor power—marks the capital-labor relation and is thought to be a process by which other forms of exploitation become subordinate. In this way, the working class in the Western metropoles forms the definition of the proletariat as a class-for-itself, and other forms of subordination are displaced. Yet these other forms are nonetheless the experiences and inheritances of much of the world's population, both within and outside the West.[20]

3.

As I have stated, one of the distinctive characteristics of Frankfurt School critical theory, which sets it apart from (analytical, liberal) philosophy, is the extent to which it makes "the social" central to its understandings. The modern social, or modernity, is seen to be constituted as the outcome of endogenous processes of European history. These include the processes of economic and political change associated with the Industrial and French revolutions and underpinned by the cultural changes brought about by the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. The rest of the world is presented as outside these world-historical processes, and furthermore colonial connections are seen as insignificant to their development. Such an understanding conflates Europe with modernity and renders the process of becoming modern, at least in the first instance, one of endogenous European development. In earlier work, I have argued that the historical record is different from that found within standard understandings of modernity, and that this framing is contested within historical studies.[21] These revisionist histories of the making of the modern world—for example, those that understand the Haitian Revolution as a world-historical event,[22] or those that regard colonial processes of extraction as central to the making of capitalist modernity,[23] or those that see the construction of the United States as a project of empire[24]—could inform a decolonized critical theory.

While the standard historical accounts of these events—and, by implication, of modernity itself—have not remained unchanged outside the mainstream, as noted above, what has remained remarkably constant has been the historiographical frame—of autonomous, endogenous origins and subsequent global diffusion—within which these events are located within dominant social theoretical understandings, including those of the Frankfurt School. I identify two key deficiencies with these understandings. First, the endogenous processes deemed significant in the key events of modernity had broader conditions of emergence and development.

That is, the revolutions identified as European were not constituted solely by endogenous European processes but through the connected and entangled global histories that were their conditions of emergence. Second, that other global processes usually not addressed by the social sciences, such as colonial extraction, settler colonialism, and the European trade in human beings, are also significant, constitutive aspects of modernity. These, however, are elided in the conceptual framing of modernity used by Frankfurt School critical theorists. Specifically, what is missing is a systematic consideration of the world-historical processes of dispossession, appropriation, elimination, and enslavement as central to the emergence and development of modernity and its institutional forms. The failure to recognize the centrality of colonialism to modern societies means that Frankfurt School critical theorists are also less likely to recognize modes of neocolonialism in the present, for example, in the form of land grabs, the appropriation of mineral wealth, the denial of recourse to public funds on the part of refugees and migrants, or new justifications for unfree labor in the management of global inequality.[25]

Alongside the persistence of the metanarrative of the endogenous European origins of modernity, there is a similarly insistent idea—the idea of progress associated with the development of moral-practical reasoning as embodied in and by this metanarrative. For Habermas, for example, following Weber, modernity represents the progressive rationalization of worldviews and modes of life.[26] As such, modernity is understood in terms of historical progress, even if that progress constitutes an "unfinished project" and one which continually raises new questions concerning issues of domination and emancipation. It is this idea of empirical historical progress—in institutions and thinking—that grounds the claims to normativity made by Frankfurt School critical theorists. Together, these provide the context for seeing modern European culture and thought as distinctive with respect to what are presented as earlier manifestations (the premodern) and other contemporary cultures (the nonmodern). In this way, according to these theories, the modern world does not simply exist alongside other worlds, but is said to represent a qualitative break from them and an advance over them.

As the historian William McNeill suggests—reflecting on arguments made in his earlier book, *The Rise of the West*—we must "admire those who pioneered the [modern] enterprise and treat the human adventure on earth as an amazing success story, despite all the suffering entailed."[27] Questions about who this "we" consists of, and whether "we" must celebrate the successes (of some) despite the suffering (of others) have formed the nub of postcolonial, and other, criticisms. The ruptural break seen to be established by modernity—the break that enables Europe to be understood in its own terms without having to take the rest of the world into account—frames the possibilities for the self-understandings of Frankfurt School critical theory and presents an insurmountable problem from the perspective of

postcolonial and decolonial theories. These latter theories are based on an understanding of modernity as constituted by coloniality such that modernity does not emerge from separation or rupture, but through the connected and entangled histories of European colonization. This immediately complicates the understanding of historical progress which otherwise provides the ground for much critical theory.

4.

Amy Allen, almost exceptionally among Frankfurt School critical theorists, engages with postcolonial and decolonial critiques of modernity from the social sciences.[28] Allen argues that critical theory should take postcolonial studies into account and frame its research program in relation to the "struggles around decolonization and postcolonial politics" that, she suggests, "are among the most significant struggles and wishes of our own age."[29] Moving away from the idea of European Enlightenment modernity as playing "a crucial role in grounding the normativity of critical theory," Allen pursues "an alternative strategy for thinking through the relationship between history and normativity."[30] Drawing on the work of Adorno and Foucault, she suggests that what they offer is "a more radically reflexive and historicized critical methodology that understands critique as the wholly immanent and fragmentary practice of opening up lines of fragility and fracture within the social world."[31] Their critical problematization of the present, she says, enables a fuller realization of the normative inheritance of modernity, that is, of ideals of freedom and respect for the other. As such, Allen argues that critical theory can find resources "within its own theoretical traditions" for moving away from progressive readings of history and "for a contextualist, immanent grounding of its own normative perspective."[32] The question, however, is: why valorize what can be presented as "its own theoretical tradition" rather than the possibility of learning from other traditions?

The issue is not simply how we think about progress or how we problematize the genealogies of the present. Lines of fragility and fracture have already been opened up within the social world globally as a consequence of the Enlightenment project and its associated practices. One need think only of the climate crisis and its differential consequences for societies globally, where those who have contributed least to the changes leading to global warming, for example, feel its devasting effects with greatest force.[33] These are the practices that have led postcolonial and decolonial theorists to argue against the possibility of a substantiated idea of progress as central to historical movement. As such, the critique of historical progress is not simply an academic matter but points to the activities that have been labelled as progressive and yet have had deeply detrimental consequences (on others). This critique would also require thinking through how repairing those histories would enable us to enact our commitments. Drawing on the work of Christoph Menke, Allen argues that putting "our" Enlightenment inheritance into

question "by interrogating its entanglement with the coloniality of power is a way of taking up this inheritance by decolonizing it, and thus of acting in solidarity with the suffering of the colonized."[34]

Simply transforming the grounding of critical theory's normative perspective, however, is insufficient. Given the Frankfurt School's focus on critical theory's ability to act in the world, what actions would be necessary to enliven this act of solidarity? This question gains further traction when we consider that Allen seems to be suggesting that critical theory needs only to acknowledge the struggles and wishes of the age, but does not need to be substantially reformulated in the light of arguments made by postcolonial and decolonial theorists who have brought these issues to attention. It is problematic to suggest that the answers to the questions posed by postcolonial and decolonial theorists are already to be found within a tradition of thought that did not even acknowledge the historical processes of colonization and enslavement as worthy of consideration. This perspective, as I will discuss at greater length subsequently, comes out of an unwillingness to learn or perhaps even a belief that there is nothing to learn by engaging with others (in other words, from the practice of epistemic injustice). All that is required is to take the other into account—to "add" them to one's understandings without transforming the nature of the understandings that had previously excluded them (a process that reproduces epistemological injustice).

Postcolonial and decolonial thought is not simply about creating epistemic fractures within imperialist systems of thought; it also seeks to recognize and repair the very real fractures created in the social world by those systems of thought and their associated practices. The conflation of moral reasoning with the historical processes of modernity, without addressing how the standard, recognized processes were themselves constituted through processes of coloniality, undercuts the validity of such claims. Similarly, it is not possible simply to seek to ground normativity by problematizing our own point of view and respecting others who are different from ourselves. In part, we must acknowledge how some of these differences have been produced through histories of colonization; that is, histories of domination and subordination that need to be addressed.

Progress in and for Europe came at the cost of the lives and livelihoods of others. Not to engage with the entanglement of the histories that have produced modernity is to give up any authority to speak of the universal. This is why I suggest that it is the belief in historical progress that very precisely means that Frankfurt School critical theory can make no progress on this topic. What is evident is that progress is given up at the point that Europeans seem unable to believe in their own narrative as progressive. However, that cannot mean that progress outside of European constructions is not possible as a consequence of a critique of those constructions and their histories. After all, this is how Europeans have presented their traditions.

5.

The idea of historical progress, in the terms of Frankfurt School critical theory, requires those who were previously excluded and subjugated to wish to be included on the terms of those who were hitherto their oppressors. There is little recognition that the modern social, constituted on the basis of domination, exclusion, and modes of subjugation, would need to be reconstructed, both epistemologically and materially, in order for there to be justice. It is almost as if, for Frankfurt School critical theory, a world structured on injustice could be redeemed simply by subsequent inclusion. As Anthony Bogues argues, it is an interesting argument that suggests that empirical historical progress has occurred, and that emancipation and freedom are possible, without having to take into account the debasement of humanity that occurred while Europe wielded coercive power over people who had been enslaved and colonized.[35] While Bogues makes this argument in the context of the histories of the United States, I would suggest that it has much broader implications. The wounds of colonialism and enslavement have to be, as he suggests, worked through "not as a historical memory but as a present past."[36]

In this context, the past and its problems are better approached through an understanding of reparations, whereby those who were previously dominant (and those who continue to benefit from structures of domination) understand and engage with the injustice of that domination and how it structures the present. The injustices of the past cannot be repaired in the sense that suffering could be undone or the past restored. Nor is an argument for reparations an argument for compensation for individual losses. It is an argument about current inequities in distribution that are placed beyond the purview of justice by virtue of being represented as merely historical. The current system of inequality of disadvantage and advantage requires a form of redistribution that recognizes the unjustified advantages deriving from colonial appropriation. This is the form of reparations, for example, argued for by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM)—a grouping primarily of island states in the Caribbean—which set up the Caribbean Reparations Commission in 2013.[37] Their ten-point program for reparations calls for, among other things, investment in the development of health care systems and educational and cultural institutions, as well as technology transfers and science sharing.

It is important to note that this form of reparation is collective, rather than individual, unlike the reparation of slave owners for their loss of "property" after abolition, for example.[38] The latter compounded the original injustice by creating an individual heritable fund to pass down the generations.[39] In contrast, collective reparations of the sort advocated for by CARICOM are inclusive insofar as all citizens have access to the new benefits created. José Atiles-Osoria rightly calls this a form of "decolonial justice."[40] Whereas enslavement and other forms of dispossession have created what W. E. B. Du Bois called a "global color line,"[41] collective

reparations seek to abolish that color line to the benefit of all. However, my point here is also that there is an obstacle within Frankfurt School critical theory to recognizing reparations as a universalizable project. Its frames of understanding emerged from a history that involved the systematic oppression of others but did not consider how that history might have shaped its concepts and categories. As such, the idea of (material) reparations also needs to be placed in the context of understandings of epistemological justice—that is, recognition of the injustices that structure our understandings that further require transformation. This is something that should be at the heart of Frankfurt School critical theory, although it seems unable to take the necessary step. This is a step that would involve making colonialism central to its understandings of modernity and its social structures.

Reparation, then, is epistemological insofar as it requires a transformation of understandings and practical insofar as it requires a redistribution of resources to address the inequalities inherited from the past. The parallels with gender justice should be self-evident. Patriarchal practices are not overcome by the inclusion of women under the sign of masculinity. Why should we not expect the same of coloniality, except for the fact that it is constructed by mainstream social theory, and by Frankfurt School critical theory alike, as being in and of the past and not part of the social structures of the modern present? I have already identified the universalism of Frankfurt School critical theory as entailing a dialogue in which participants must come to accept the terms established by one of the parties to dialogue. Those terms were also established in circumstances that involved the unrecognized oppression of the party now entering the dialogue, where they are constrained by the terms of those who had previously mobilized its categories in support of oppression.

If, following Holmwood, we think of an approach to learning in which all categories of a dialogue are mutable within that dialogue, then we can think of learning in terms of overcoming problems and of creating new understandings that reconstruct categories in the process.[42] As Holmwood argues, "it is engagement with practical problems—that is, problems bearing upon what is otherwise held to be necessary—that is the only meaningful location for judgements about what is 'necessary' (or 'good'), and dialogue is the only means for arriving at a new settled judgement."[43] If the problem that contemporary Frankfurt School critical theory (from Habermas onwards) is seeking to avoid, by cleaving to universalism, is that of relativism, then relativism is also overcome by an approach that acknowledges that standards are created in dialogue and are not simply the condition of dialogue.[44] In this way, learning can be understood as context-transforming, but not, by that token, reliant on claims that are independent of context (the claim to universalism). The wish for it to be otherwise is paradoxically a wish to be able to deny the need to learn.

Further, as Robin Celikates argues, social learning of the kind to which critical theorists wish to apply the term "progress" occurs in the context of structures

of domination and oppression.[45] Those who are oppressed are not simply entering a conversation with a will to persuade; they are in a struggle for their lives. How would we know that oppressors had truly understood or learned from the struggles to address forms of structural injustice? Would their understanding not have to also involve some material reparation for that past injustice to demonstrate what had been learned? Otherwise, learning is a process of inclusion without any acknowledgement that structures of disadvantage continue to bequeath their effects, not least in contemporary forms of racialized inequality. Learning would require a commitment to the further transformation of the material conditions that produced the injustice in the first place.

6.

Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* is a searing critique of European "civilization." Césaire begins by stating that "a civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization."[46] Writing in the aftermath of the horrors perpetrated by the Nazi regime on European soil and drawing on the longer histories of European colonialism across the world, Césaire argues forcefully that, as it established itself on the brutalization of others, it negates its own claim to be recognized as a "civilization." "Truly," he states, "there are sins for which no one has the power to make amends and which can never be fully expiated."[47] Sixty-five years on, Frankfurt School critical theory, for the most part, stubbornly refuses to confront Césaire's challenge. In this context, what do we call universal "civilizational" values that turn away from their histories? Away from any attempt to resolve those histories?

The injustices that disfigure the world that we share in common can only be addressed through acknowledging the histories that have produced them as well as the historiographies that have obscured them. As Bogues argues, the liberal, or critical tradition, is not the only one from which a dialectic of freedom emerges.[48] There is also a dialectic of freedom that emerges "out of the interstices of domination" and which, in its practice, "disrupts normalized imperial liberty."[49] We need to give up the commitment to historical progress as the central normative dimension of critical theory in favor of redressing the wrongs of the past through a commitment to epistemological justice and to material reparations. It is not modernity that is the unfinished project; rather, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres has argued, it is the project of decolonization that is unfinished.[50] It is this which any properly *critical* theory must address. The issue, then, is less to decolonize Frankfurt School critical theory than that Frankfurt School critical theorists should take colonial histories seriously in their understanding of modernity. This would, in turn, require a commitment to the collective projects of decolonization and reparations. It is only by working together to address the inequalities that emanate from our shared past that the space is opened up for the possibility of a future different from the present.

We are at a moment when European social theory, generally—and Frankfurt School critical theory, specifically—needs to recognize its own limitations in the face of what is necessary to overcome present inequalities and injustices. The fear may be of a loss of "reason" as accepted categories are criticized and displaced. However, Marx and Engels addressed a similar issue in their discussion of an ascendant bourgeoisie and its consciousness of its own interests aligned with human interests.[51] The moment must come, they argued, when the bourgeoisie understands its own self-interest as a limit upon human interests. The question, then, was whether to choose human interest or self-interest. A consequence of the latter choice would be to be less than what is humanly possible. Worse, it would be to visit inhumanity upon others, whether in the form of extreme poverty or that of suffering on journeys of migration. We should not be surprised if the overcoming of colonial advantage now poses a similar question.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank John Holmwood, Robin Celikates, the editors, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on the article. All errors remain my own.

Notes

1. Allen, *End of Progress*, xii.
2. Spivak, "Glas-Piece," 39.
3. Spivak, "Criticism," 278.
4. Habermas, "Modernity."
5. Baum, "Decolonizing Critical Theory."
6. Kerner, "Postcolonial Theories."
7. Ingram, "Critical Theory and Postcolonialism."
8. Nichols, "Progress, Empire, and Social Theory."
9. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*; Bhambra, *Connected Sociologies*.
10. Allen, *End of Progress*.
11. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor."
12. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, 246.
13. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.
14. Jaeggi, *Alienation*.
15. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*.

16. Holmwood, "From 1968 to 1951."
17. Honneth, *Freedom's Right*.
18. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.
19. Bhambra, "Talking among Themselves?"
20. Bhambra and Holmwood, *Colonialism and Modern Social Theory*.
21. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity*; Bhambra, "Historical Sociology."
22. James, *Black Jacobins*.
23. Naoroji, *Poverty and UnBritish Rule*; Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Patnaik, "Revisiting the 'Drain.'"
24. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy*; Frymer, *Building an American Empire*.
25. See Bhambra, "Whither Europe?"; Holmwood, "Moral Economy versus Political Economy."
26. Habermas, "Modernity."
27. McNeill, "*The Rise of the West* after Twenty-Five Years," 3.
28. Allen, *End of Progress*. For others who have taken up these issues, see Vázquez-Arroyo, "Universal History Disavowed"; Bardawil, "Césaire with Adorno"; Kerner, "Postcolonial Theories."
29. Allen, "Adorno, Foucault, and the End of Progress," 185.
30. Allen, "Adorno, Foucault, and the End of Progress," 186.
31. Allen, *End of Progress*, 201.
32. Allen, "Adorno, Foucault, and the End of Progress," 186.
33. Sealey-Huggins, "1.5°C to Stay Alive."
34. Allen, *End of Progress*, 209.
35. Bogues, *Empire of Liberty*, 51. See also Celikates, "Slow Learners?"
36. Bogues, *Empire of Liberty*, 65.
37. Beckles, *Britain's Black Debt*; Atiles-Osoria, "Colonial State Crimes."
38. Beauvois, *Between Blood and Gold*.
39. Hall et al., *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership*.
40. Atiles-Osoria, "Colonial State Crimes."
41. Du Bois, *Color and Democracy*.
42. Holmwood, "Pragmatism and the Prospects of Sociological Theory."
43. Holmwood, "Pragmatism and the Prospects of Sociological Theory," 20–21.
44. Hankinson Nelson, "Epistemological Communities."
45. Celikates, "Slow Learners?"
46. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 31.
47. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 42. For discussion, see Viveros-Vigoya, "Political Vitality and Vital Politics."
48. Bogues, *Empire of Liberty*.
49. Bogues, *Empire of Liberty*, 37. See also Singh, *Black Is a Country*.
50. Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being."
51. Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*.

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